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On Reading Plays

BY RICHARDSON WRIGHT

THERE seem to be two kinds of people in the world—those who prefer to see plays and those who prefer to read them. Between these is a great gulf fixed. The seers look upon the readers as blasé and, in a manner of speaking, highbrow; and the readers, although they may not say it in so many words, consider the seers as a lower order who require stage action to stimulate their imagination, much in the manner in which old gentlemen, in senile stupor, pinch themselves to prove that they are still alive.

This is a great pity, especially because the distinctions are not so actually and definitely drawn. The difference between reading a play and seeing one is a matter of degrees in delight and not of kind. Moreover, it is the play that actually makes the difference. Some are acting plays and some—the poetic drama especially—closet or reading plays. In the day when the drama depended for its effectiveness on the spoken word alone, all plays were reading plays. In these times when action is a requisite to proper dramatic effects, all acting plays do not necessarily make good reading plays unless, of course, the reader has a vivid imagination that quickly grasps the sense of action. It is this vivid imagination, perhaps, which makes the reader of plays

look down upon the mere seer. . . . But we will continue this quarrel no further. What we are concerned with here are the plays to read and how to read them.

There is the first division—the plays one reads to a large assembly.

Apropos of reading to an assembly, I am reminded of a certain rural community in New England where, on Wednesday evenings, the male and female members of the Shakespeare Club have met, year after year, to read aloud from a boulderized text; and where, regularly, year after year, on the following morning the male members of the Shakespeare Club have met in the back of the general store to read aloud what Mr. Boulder boulderized.

But, on the whole, this is a very pleasant custom of reading plays *in coram populo*, and it has only one or two disadvantages. Some members may have imagination and some may not; some may be good readers and some the contrary. Eventually a sort of mild professional jealousy arises. Having seen this happen more than once, I am convinced that the ideal way of reading plays to an assembly is to select one person and make him or her the perpetual play-reader. Avoid the sort of person who had Delsarte training in early youth, or who has recently been graduated from

an elocutionary course; your audience must have something left to its imagination. Also choose the right environment for the reading and the plays to fit the environment. In summer read out of doors, and in winter choose a studio or large room. And in making the selection fit the season and the plays, remember that it is difficult indeed to gather much enthusiasm for Ibsen when one has apple blossoms drifting down on his head.

Of the innumerable plays to read in assembly, I would suggest these eighteen. There are many more, of course, and I am not attempting to pick the best, but merely suggesting a readable, varied list: Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* and *Enemy of the People*; Benavente's *Bonds of Interest*; Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton*; Francois Coppée's *For the Crown*; Augustus Thomas's *The Witching Hour*; Rostand's *The Far Away Princess* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*; Gillette's *Held by the Enemy*; Percival Wilde's *House of Cards and Dawn*; George Middleton's *Tradition*; Yeats' *Kathlee Ni Houlihan* and *Land of Heart's Desire*; Dunsany's *A Night at an Inn*, *The Queen's Enemies* and *The Tents of the Arabs*; Synge's *The Shadow in the Glen*.

Climbing the ascent of delights in dramatic reading, we come next to the solitary audience. I don't know why—perhaps because I have one and she is a good listener—but I think the best solitary audience in the world is one's wife. My selection of plays is based solely on this faculty of connubial listening. There are, of course, plays that one may read to any man's wife. Those selected here are best read to one's own.

But before I set them down, let me suggest one or two settings for such reading. A winter's night, an open fire, a large room down which one may pace, the easiest of clothes and a group of children who sleep through anything. That is one ideal. The other is to take a cross-country tramp, to sit down suddenly and without any reason upon some comfortable hillock—and produce a vol-

ume of plays from your pocket and start to read. In both instances, the click of knitting needles will furnish all the applause required.

For those occasions one might read: Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *The Master Builder*; Shaw's *Getting Married* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*; Pinero's *Iris* and *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*; Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows* (reserve *The Ten Pound Look* for after quarrels); Sudermann's *Magda*; Hervieu's *Trail of the Torch*; Echeray's *The Great Galeotto*; Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*; Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*; Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna* and possibly Dunsany's *The Lost Silk Hat*.

To this selection one might add a list of plays to take on a honeymoon, plays to read aloud to a wife when sick; plays particularly adapted to country and city reading and plays to read in bed. Of the last the choice depends on how soon one wishes to fall asleep. Of the somnolent plays there is a vast library. Unfortunately space does not permit a selection for all these phases of life. I press on to that ultimate joy of reading plays—the plays to read alone.

Do not mistake my intention—I hold no brief for the selfish reader. Yet there are plays, just as there are poems, which are best relished in the privacy of what the Bible is pleased to call one's closet. Much of the Greek drama and most all of the Restoration fall into this class—the one for an obvious reason, the other because the classics require the concentration of conscious effort.

In this group I would put Euripides *Alcestis*; Webster's *Eradne* or *The Maid's Tragedy*; *Cymbeline*; Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and *Rosmersholm*; Shaw's *Devil's Disciples*; Lavedan's *Le Duel*; Hauptmann's *The Sunken Bell*; Schnitzler's *Anatol* and Constance Mackay's *Vibaud of Bath and Other Places*.

Finally, since I believe in bringing up children in the way they ought to go, I would suggest this selection of plays for children, to be read as a special prize for being very good. They may, con-

ceivably, distract the young mind from the lure of Mutt and Jeff. Here are twelve: Barrie's *Peter Pan*; Gilbert's *The Mikado*; Mackay's *House of the Heart and Silver Thread*; Alice J. Walker's *Lafayette and Columbus*; Mrs. Burnett's

The Little Princess; *Hansel and Gretel*; Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, Eleanor Gates's *The Poor Little Rich Girl*; *Snow White*; *Alice in Wonderland* (Gerstenberg version) and Dunsany's *The Golden Doom* and *The Gods of the Mountain*.



To the Airmen

By JOSEPH AUSLANDER

Scorners of earth and all the voice of earth
 In tumult, all the dunes and stately hills
 And mountain-tops that battlement the world
 Scorning, in wild ascension to the poles
 Of air, O noble cavalry of the clouds,
 Hail! from the lowly and laborious plain
 Where puny strugglers crawl into their caves
 And warm their souls over the hoarded sparks
 Of sunshine in remembrance . . . Ye embrace
 The whole effulgence outright! Ye are giants
 Hewing a passage to Prometheus! Ye
 Shall break his fetters and the vulture's beak
 And hurl the gods of vengeance from their thrones
 And bring man unto paradise anew!
 For ye are winged with thunder of the heart
 And sandalled with the lightning of the soul
 To speed on high adventure and to drive
 Death like a spider from his skyey den!
 Ethereal knights, blithe Galahads of war
 Against the enemies of the dawn of hope
 Manward, ye plungers over peak to peak
 Of all the starry range of heaven, hail!
 We, from our earthy fastnesses, cry hail
 In jubliant breath soaring like altar-smoke
 To you, O corsairs of the sea of winds,
 Poets of the azure, in whose every flight
 Is romance, in whose every comet-clash
 Resounds an epic ringing to the stars!